

**Judas Iscariot and the *Gospel of Judas***  
Birger A. Pearson

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# Judas Iscariot and the *Gospel of Judas*

Birger A. Pearson

At the 2004 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio Charles W. Hedrick gave to some of his colleagues copies of photographs of six pages from a Coptic manuscript containing the long-lost *Gospel of Judas*. One of the photographs had the ending of that gospel with its title: ΠΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΝΙΟΥΔΑΔ. Charlie reported that he had other photographs, but they were hardly legible. He had gotten this material from a mid-western antiquities dealer, Bruce Ferrini.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, these pages aroused a good deal of interest on the part of those of us who read them, and we were eager to see more. Then in April 2006, with much fanfare, the National Geographic Society produced a television documentary and published an English translation of the Coptic text of the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>2</sup> According to most (but not all) interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas*, Judas Iscariot emerges in the text as a hero rather than a villain.

The publication of the *Gospel of Judas* provides an occasion for revisiting old questions about Judas Iscariot. Was he a treacherous betrayer, or Jesus' best friend? Who was he, really? What did he do? What were his motivations for whatever it was that he did? Such questions have been pondered by theologians, scholars, poets, playwrights, novelists, and composers of music<sup>3</sup> for a long time. But now people are being tempted by book publishers and enterprising scholars to think that this new gospel finally provides the answers. Does it?

In what follows, I want first to show how the figure of Judas Iscariot developed in early Christian traditions and literature, involving a gradual process of Judas' demonization. Next, I shall show how one can get "behind" the earliest texts and come up with a historical reconstruction of Judas' role that is far different from the traditional presentation. Then we shall take a good look at the *Gospel of Judas* and examine Judas Iscariot's role in that gospel. Finally, I shall offer some remarks on the importance of the *Gospel of Judas* as an early Christian text.

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<sup>1</sup> See James M. Robinson, "From *The Nag Hammadi Codices* to *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Gospel of Judas*" (Claremont CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Occasional Papers 48, January 2006), 7; Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and his Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 129-32.

<sup>2</sup> Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, ed., *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Washington DC: National Geographic Society, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Judas Iscariot plays a leading role in Andrew Lloyd-Weber's musical, "Jesus Christ Superstar."

## 1. Judas Iscariot in early Christian traditions and literature

Judas, one of the Twelve, is identified in the gospels as Iscariot to distinguish him from several other men named Judas, the Hellenized form of Yehudah, the Hebrew name given to one of Jacob's twelve sons (Genesis 29:35). The earliest occurrence of the name "Iscariot" is found in Mark 3:19, where it is given in its Hebrew form (*Iskarioth*). Several interpretations have been given to the name, but the one I find most interesting is that in Aramaic it means, "the man from the City," i.e., Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, this is the earliest reference to Judas in Christian literature. In Mark's list of the Twelve he appears last as "Judas Iscariot, who handed him [Jesus] over" (Mark 3:19).<sup>5</sup>

The Greek verb in this passage (παράδιδωμι) means "hand over." It is often translated "betray" when it is used of Judas' action (e.g., in RSV, NRSV, and others), but this is a mistranslation. William Klassen, the author of the best book on Judas Iscariot available in English,<sup>6</sup> has shown that the verb παράδιδωμι occurs frequently in Greek literature, and should never be translated "betray."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is a perfectly good Greek word for "betray," προδίδωμι, but that word is never used of Judas' action in gospel texts.<sup>8</sup>

Later on in Mark, Judas goes to the chief priests and offers to hand Jesus over at an opportune time (14:10). At the Last Supper, Jesus predicts that one of the Twelve will hand him over (14:18) and pronounces a "woe" upon him: "woe to that man [or "alas for that man"] by whom the Son of Man is handed over. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (14:21). Jesus' prediction comes true when Judas leads an armed crowd "from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders" to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:43). Judas greets Jesus, "Rabbi," and kisses him. Jesus is then arrested (14:45-46).

Later gospels either expand on Mark's accounts (Matthew, Luke) or on early traditions relating to Judas' actions (Matthew, Luke, John). All of them expand the

<sup>4</sup> Günther Schwarz, *Jesus und Judas: Aramaische Untersuchungen zur Jesus-Judas-Überlieferung der Evangelien und der Apostelgeschichte*, BWANT 123 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988), 6-12; cited in William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 33.

<sup>5</sup> In a forthcoming commentary on the Gospel of Mark Dennis R. MacDonald argues that Mark based his list of the twelve on an earlier list found in the sayings source Q (cf. Luke 6:12-16), to which he added the name Iscariot and the phrase, "who betrayed him." He also argues, less plausibly, that Mark invented Judas the betrayer on the basis of Homer's depiction of Melanthius in the *Odyssey* (Od. 17.231-78). I am grateful to Dennis for sharing some pages of his work with me. On his theory of Markan dependence on Homer see his book, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Klassen, *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-56. In Frederick Danker's revision of the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) four meanings are given, none of them "betray." Danker cites Klassen's book in declining to give the meaning "betray" for Judas' action (p. 762a).

<sup>8</sup> It occurs in a secondary variant reading of Mark 14:10 in a few manuscripts.

Judas traditions in such a way as to underscore Judas' treachery, greed, or even demonic influence. That is especially true of the portraits of Judas we find in Luke and John.

Matthew expands Mark's account of Judas' negotiations with the priests by having Judas ask them what they would give him if he turned Jesus over, and they give him thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-15). Other expansions of the story are shaped with reference to Old Testament texts (e.g., Zechariah 11:12 for the thirty pieces of silver). Matthew also adds an account of Judas' remorse and death, probably based on an early tradition. When he sees that the chief priests have handed Jesus over (παρέδωκαν) to Pilate, the Roman governor, Judas "repents," brings the thirty pieces of silver back to the priests, throws them on the floor of the temple, and goes out and hangs himself. The priests use the money to purchase "the potter's field" for the burial of strangers (Matthew 27:3-10).

Luke is the only gospel writer to label Judas as a "betrayor" or "traitor" (προδοτής, related to the verb προδίδωμι, "betray," Luke 6:16). Judas' negotiation with the chief priests is introduced with the words, "Satan entered into Judas" (Luke 22:3). How ironic! Judas, one of "the Twelve" given "power and authority over all demons" earlier in the story,<sup>9</sup> is now beset by the demons' chief! In the Gethsemane scene, Luke has Jesus recoil from Judas' attempt to kiss him (Luke 22:48). Judas' death is not mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, but in the same author's second volume, the Book of Acts, Judas' death is represented in a rather grisly scene. In a speech put into the mouth of Peter, it is said of Judas that "falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his guts gushed out" (Acts 1:19). The remaining eleven disciples choose Matthias for the "ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place" (Acts 1:25-26).

The process of demonizing Judas is complete by the time we get to the Gospel of John. Jesus is made to say to his disciples at one point, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). In the story of Jesus' anointing by Mary of Bethany, Judas objects to the expenditure for the costly oil and remarks that it could have been used for the poor. The evangelist adds, "This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it" (John 12:6). During the Last Supper the evangelist remarks that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to hand him over" (John 13:2). In his "High Priestly Prayer" at the Last Supper, Jesus prays to the Father about his disciples, "I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12).

One interesting feature of the New Testament accounts is that Judas' actions are taken as part of God's plan, or as fulfillment of prophecy. Even so, the expansion of

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 9:1, based on Mark 6:7.

the Judas tradition is notable for its increasing demonization of Judas. Christian literature after the New Testament carries this tendency even further.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate stage in this process is reached in a late Coptic work entitled *Book of the Resurrection of Christ by Bartholemew* (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century), where his sufferings by punishing angels in Amente (the Egyptian underworld) are described. When Jesus empties Amente of its imprisoned souls between the time of his crucifixion and his resurrection ("the Harrowing of Hell"), only Judas, Cain, and Herod remain, subjected to the torments of three-headed demons.<sup>11</sup>

The critical scholar is invited, by the nature of the evidence, to probe behind our earliest sources to see if there might possibly be a way of looking more "neutrally" at what it was that Judas actually did, and what motivated him to do it.

One complicating factor in this is that the Gospel of Mark is preceded by some fifteen to twenty years by the earliest Christian literature of all, the seven genuine epistles of Paul (probably written from 51-56). Judas does not appear at all in Paul's writings. The one who "handed" Jesus "over" is God himself: "Jesus our Lord, who was handed over [παρέδοθη] for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:24-25; cf. 8:32; 1 Corinthians 11:23). God's act in "handing over" Jesus is interpreted by Paul in light of the story of the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah (53:5-12), whom God "handed over [παρέδωκεν] for our sins" (53:6, Greek version). When Paul enumerates the appearances of the risen Christ after his resurrection, the second appearance (after the one to Cephas = Peter) is "to the Twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:5). Do these twelve include Judas Iscariot? Or his replacement, Matthias (Acts 1:26)? It would appear that Paul knew nothing at all about Judas Iscariot, or his role in the events leading up to Jesus' death.

So can we get back to the "historical Judas"? An effort to do so is, of course, hampered by the fact that all of our evidence has come down to us colored, more or less, by the "post-Easter" faith of the early Christians. Yet scholars have been at work for a long time to probe behind that "post-Easter" filter to understand the person and teachings of the "historical Jesus" in the light of the Jewish environment in which he must be situated historically. As we all know, the results have been varied, to say the least.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of the treatment of Judas in early Christian literature see William Klassen's article, "Judas Iscariot," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3:1091-96, esp. 1095-96.

<sup>11</sup> See Matthias Westerhoff, *Auferstehung und Jenseits im koptischen "Buch der Auferstehung Jesu Christi, unseres Herrn,"* *Orientalia Biblica et Christiana* 11 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 78-93 (Coptic and German). For an English summary, see William Schneemelcher, "Coptic Bartholomew Texts," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, rev. ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co./ Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 2:553-56.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. my article, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar" (Claremont CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Occasional Papers 35, 1996).

Nevertheless, “historical Jesus” scholarship can be used as an aid in attempting to get back to the “historical Judas,” for the two are bound to one another as disciple to master.

## 2. Reconstructing the story of the “historical Judas”

William Klassen, in his book on Judas, has attempted to reconstruct the story of Judas’ act of “handing over” Jesus to the Temple authorities. In agreeing with the chief priests to hand Jesus over to them, Judas is taking upon himself the role of a *masor* (“informer”). In Second-Temple Judaism, whereas it was forbidden for a Jew to “inform” on a fellow Jew to the enemies of the Jews, in this case the Romans, it was perfectly justifiable to inform on a fellow Jew to the Jewish authorities, i.e., the chief priests of the Temple. Moreover, Klassen suggests that Judas did this with Jesus’ collaboration. “Judas collaborated with Jesus himself to bring about what Jesus wanted to have done: God’s will.”<sup>13</sup> Judas was setting up a situation in which Jesus would confront the high priest so that “Caiaphas could get a better understanding of the reform program Jesus had in mind for the renewal of Israel.”<sup>14</sup> Judas certainly did not think that his act in handing Jesus over to the chief priests would lead to his execution by the Romans. Judas’ suicide, which would not have been considered “a crime or sin in Judaism of that period,”<sup>15</sup> can be considered an act of atonement. From Matthew’s account it can be concluded that “Judas was the first and the strongest witness to Jesus’ innocence, making his confession to the highest authorities in the land. He could well have been the first to die with Jesus.”<sup>16</sup>

Klassen’s reconstruction is speculative, of course, but certainly plausible.<sup>17</sup> I would suggest a somewhat different scenario, equally speculative, which involves the role of Jewish eschatology in Jesus’ message centered on the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. This scenario takes into account not only Jesus’ role as a prophet of the coming Kingdom, but also his role as one whom many of his contemporaries regarded as God’s designated Messiah, regardless of whether Jesus saw himself in that light.

In this scenario Judas is one of those who looks upon Jesus as God’s promised Messiah. Seeing from Jesus’ actions in the Temple that Jesus is now in confrontation with the “Powers that Be,” Judas resolves to help the situation along by assisting the Temple police in Jesus’ arrest, perhaps with the collusion of Jesus himself. The long-awaited confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Rome

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<sup>13</sup> Klassen, *Judas*, 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also Robinson, *Secrets of Judas* (cit. n. 1), 33-51.

would now come to its climax. The Temple priesthood was, of course, in collaboration with the Romans in their rule over the holy land.

But things don't go as planned. Much to his dismay, Judas sees his friend expiring on the cross with his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). The "twelve legions of angels" (Matthew 26:53) expected to come and rout the Roman occupiers and set Jesus upon his throne as Messianic King have not materialized. In utter despair, Judas commits suicide. The other disciples flee (Mark 14:50). Some of them even go back to their old jobs as fishermen (John 21:2-3). Judas turns out to have been Jesus' best friend.

The foregoing exercise in historical imagination shows how one can utilize our canonical sources critically, and find a Judas that turns out to be utterly different from the one portrayed in our canonical tradition. Now we have a new gospel, the *Gospel of Judas*, and yet another source to use in analyzing the Judas tradition. That source, indeed, presents Jesus as Judas' best friend, at least at first glance. Have we now found the real truth about Judas, hidden from us for hundreds of years?

### 3. The Coptic Gospel of Judas

The church father Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote in around 180 a five-volume work against the various Christian "heresies" known to him, mostly various kinds of Gnostics. One group of Gnostics is described in the following way:

Others again say that Cain was from the superior power, and confess Esau and (the tribe of) Korah and the Sodomites and all such as their kinsmen. They were attacked by the creator, but none of them suffered any ill. For Sophia snatched away from them to herself what belonged to her. This Judas the traitor knew very well, and he alone of all the apostles recognized the truth and accomplished the mystery of the betrayal, by which everything earthly and heavenly is dissolved, as they say. And they produce a fabrication, which they call the Gospel of Judas.<sup>18</sup>

For obvious reasons, the church did not preserve "fabricated" gospels such as that attributed to Judas. Nevertheless, the sands of Egypt have delivered up Coptic manuscripts containing numerous Gnostic works: the Bruce and Askew Codices discovered in the eighteenth century, the Berlin Gnostic Codex discovered toward the end of the nineteenth century (but only published in 1955), and the thirteen Coptic manuscripts constituting the "Nag Hammadi Library," discovered in December, 1945. A number of Gnostic "gospels" are included among the texts preserved in these

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<sup>18</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.31.1, in Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1: *Patristic Evidence*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 41-42. Epiphanius of Salamis (4<sup>th</sup> century) also mentions the *Gospel of Judas* as a gospel in use by certain heretics he calls "Cainites" (*Panarion* 38.1.1-5). Epiphanius is dependent upon Irenaeus and adds nothing new of importance.



Coptic manuscripts, but not the *Gospel of Judas*. But finally, it has been determined that a more recently discovered manuscript, the Codex Tchacos, contains that long-lost Gnostic gospel.<sup>19</sup>

In 1983 four manuscripts smuggled out of Egypt were offered for sale in Geneva, Switzerland, two Coptic and two Greek papyrus codices. They were brought to the attention of James M. Robinson, Director of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont, California.<sup>20</sup> Robinson sent a young scholar named Stephen Emmel (now Professor of Coptology at the University of Münster in Germany) to Geneva to examine the Coptic material, and to assist in negotiations for its purchase. \$50,000 was available for the purchase of the Coptic manuscripts, but this was far less than the asking price for the Greek and Coptic manuscripts together, three million dollars! So the manuscripts remained in private hands.

Emmel had been allowed to examine the Coptic material briefly. One of the manuscripts contained the Epistles of Paul, but the other one was a Gnostic manuscript. Emmel was able to identify two tractates in that codex as texts that are included in the Nag Hammadi corpus.<sup>21</sup> He concluded that the additional tractate that he saw in the manuscript was a hitherto unknown Gnostic revelation dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, a typical Gnostic literary genre. He did not then recognize it as the long-lost *Gospel of Judas*.

Finally, in 2000 the Gnostic manuscript was purchased by a woman named Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, and placed temporarily in the Beinecke Library at Yale. Bentley Layton, a Yale Coptologist, was able to identify the hitherto unknown tractate as a "Gospel of Judas." The Beinecke Library declined to purchase the codex, and it was turned over in 2001 to a foundation in Basel, Switzerland. Since that time the manuscript, now known as the Codex Tchacos, has been studied by a Swiss Coptologist, Rodolphe Kasser and a German colleague, Gregor Wurst. It now turns out that there are remains of four tractates in the Codex.<sup>22</sup> Beside the *Gospel of Judas*, there is a previously unknown tractate now called the *Book of Allogenes*. Indeed, four of the six pages that I saw in 2004 are from that tractate, and not the *Gospel of Judas*. A critical edition of the Codex Tchacos is expected to appear sometime this year, to be published by the National Geographic Society.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> That manuscript was one of four discovered in a tomb in Middle Egypt in around 1978. The story of the discovery and the subsequent fate of the manuscripts has been pieced together by Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington DC: National Geographic Society, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Robinson recounts this event and subsequent developments in *The Secrets of Judas*. Unfortunately, owing to the secrecy imposed by the National Geographic Society on the few scholars who had access to the Codex Tchacos, a circle in which Robinson was not included, his book was out of date by the time it was published, for by that time the *Gospel of Judas* had already appeared.

<sup>21</sup> The *Letter of Peter to Philip* (NHC VIII.2) and the *(First) Apocalypse of James* (NHC V.3).

<sup>22</sup> Kasser et al., *Gospel of Judas*, 48-50.

<sup>23</sup> At the 2006 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature Marvin Meyer shared with me and others a preliminary copy of the entire Codex Tchacos ("for private use only"). The Coptic text of the *Gospel of Judas* is

A good deal of intrigue is involved in what happened to the Codex Tchacos between 1983 and 2001.<sup>24</sup> Over the years it has sustained a lamentable amount of damage, with considerable loss of material. So the *Gospel of Judas* is incomplete as we now have it, with some extensive lacunae in crucial parts of the text.

The *Gospel of Judas* is certainly to be identified as the one by that title mentioned by Irenaeus. We recall particularly the following comment in the passage already cited: "He (Judas) alone of all the apostles recognized the truth and accomplished the mystery of the betrayal, by which everything earthly and heavenly is dissolved."<sup>25</sup> That is how Judas is portrayed in the *Gospel of Judas*.

The opening passage (*incipit*) reads as follows: "The secret word of declaration by which Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot, during eight days, three days before he celebrated Passover" (33,1-6). The appearance of Jesus on earth is then narrated, and the call of the twelve disciples (33,6-21). One day he meets his disciples in Judaea, and finds them at prayer. He laughs at them, and tells them that they don't really know him. The disciples become angry, but then Judas gets up and confronts Jesus, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal aeon of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you" (35,15-21).

Jesus then speaks privately with Judas and promises that he will reveal to him alone "the mysteries of the kingdom." He tells Judas that someone will replace him "in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god" (35,21-36,10). Reflected here is the story in the Book of Acts of Judas' replacement by Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). The twelve as a group are represented as worshipping the lower creator god, i.e., Yaldabaoth, named later in the text (51,15).

The next morning Jesus appears again to his disciples, and reports that he had gone to "another great and holy generation." When the disciples ask about this, Jesus laughs and tells them, "no one born [of] this aeon will see that [generation]" and tells them that they belong to the "generation of humanity" (36,11-37,20).

On another day when Jesus appears to the disciples they report that they had seen a vision of a great temple, with sacrifices offered up by twelve wicked priests who invoke Jesus' name. Jesus interprets the vision as referring to the twelve disciples. In what follows several lines are missing or damaged, and the meaning is unclear. At one point Jesus says to the disciples, "Stop struggling with me. Each of you has his

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edited by Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst. The English translation is by Marvin Meyer and F. Gaudard. Notes are by Meyer and Wurst. A Coptic transcription of the *Gospel of Judas* had already been made available on its website by the National Geographic Society in April. The transcription and translation most recently obtained represent improvements over those previously published. I am grateful to Marvin Meyer for sharing this material with me. Quotations from the *Gospel of Judas* in what follows are taken from this new version.

<sup>24</sup> For the complete story see Robinson, *Secrets of Judas*, esp. 89-173.

<sup>25</sup> cf. fn. 18.

own star, [and every] one . . .” (42,7-9), but the rest of the page is totally lost. On the next page Jesus refers again to the eternal generation (43,9-11).

We next find Judas in dialogue with Jesus, asking about that generation. Jesus contrasts that generation with the rest of humanity. Judas then reports that he has seen a great vision. Jesus laughs and says to Judas, “You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard? But speak up, and I shall bear with you” (44,21-23). Judas says that he sees himself being stoned by “the twelve disciples.” He comes to a place where there is a great and beautiful house, surrounded by a throng of people. Someone says, “Master, take me in along with these people.” Because two lines are virtually missing here, it is not clear who the speaker in Judas’ vision is, but I assume it is Judas. In any case, Jesus then says to Judas, “Your star has led you astray, Judas.... No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy.” Jesus tells Judas that he has explained “the mysteries of the kingdom,” and told him about the “error of the stars.” After a lacuna in the text reference is made to “the twelve aeons” (44,15-46,4). At this point we recall that Jesus has already referred to Judas as the “thirteenth spirit” (44,21). As such he is distinguished from the twelve disciples, who belong to the lower cosmic realms.

Judas then asks Jesus, “Master, could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?” Most of Jesus’ answer is lost in a two-line lacuna, but concludes with the statement, “but you may grieve much when you see the kingdom and all its generation.” Judas protests, “You have set me apart for that generation.” Jesus replies, “you will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they [will . . .] to you, and that you will not ascend on high to the holy [generation]” (46,5-47,1). There is considerable ambiguity as to what is actually meant in this passage. We shall have to return to that problem later.

Jesus then presents to Judas an extended Gnostic revelation consisting of an elaborate theogony, an account of the demonic beings of the lower cosmos, and a Gnostic version of the creation of Adam and Eve. In the theogony there is a divine triad of the Invisible Spirit, a “luminous cloud” that can be identified as the mother Barbelo,<sup>26</sup> and her son, Autogenes (“Self-Generated”). Under Autogenes are four “luminaries,” a heavenly Adam, a heavenly Seth, “the incorruptible [generation] of Seth,” and numerous “aeons” and “angels” (47,1-50,11). The lower cosmos is modeled after the heavenly world, and ruled over by twelve angels, whose chief is called “Nebro” or “Yaldabaoth.” Another ruling angel is named “Saklas.”<sup>27</sup> There is also a group of five angels ruling over chaos (50,11-52,14). Saklas, together with his

<sup>26</sup> She is named in a previous passage: the “acon of Barbelo” is declared by Judas to be Jesus’ origin (35,17-18).

<sup>27</sup> Saklas is usually identified with Yaldabaoth in other Gnostic texts. Saklas is credited with the creation of Adam and Eve in the following passage.

angels, creates a human “after the likeness and after the image,” i.e., of the Adam above.<sup>28</sup> They also create Eve, called Zoe (52,14-57,7). This revelation, given privately to Judas, is a truncated version of the typical “Sethian” Gnostic myth such as is found in the *Apocryphon* (Secret Book) of *John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG,2).

Judas then puts to Jesus several questions, to which Jesus gives responses. The first has to do with human destiny. The generations destined for destruction are ruled over by various stars during the time allotted to Saklas (53,8-55,20). Unfortunately, this passage has some missing text at a crucial point having to do with Judas. Five lines are completely missing, and four others have little material left. The text resumes with Jesus’ saying to Judas, “[in] my name, and your star will ru[le] over the [thir]teenth aeon” (55,9-11).

In the passage that follows, Judas asks about people who have been baptized in Jesus’ name. After considerable loss of material, Jesus says to Judas, “Truly [I] say to you, Judas, those [who] offer sacrifices to Saklas . . .” (56,11-12). The sentence cannot be completed owing to the loss of three lines of text, but Jesus’ statement about sacrifices ends with the phrase, “everything that is evil” (56,17). It can be deduced that reference is being made to the baptismal and other rites practiced by worshippers of Saklas, recognizable to us as non-Gnostic Christians.

Jesus then turns to Judas and says, “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me” (56,17-21). Judas, in leading Jesus to his death, will enable his spirit to be released from the body and ascend back to heaven. After a final reference to the eternal generation, Jesus tells Judas, “Look, you have been told everything. Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. And the star that leads the way is your star” (57,15-20). Judas then lifts up his eyes, sees the luminous cloud, and presumably enters it. I say “presumably” because the subject of “he entered it” could be Jesus rather than Judas. We are then told that “those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying . . .” (57,23-26). Unfortunately, we don’t know what the voice said because the first eight lines of the next page are irreparably damaged.

The *Gospel of Judas* concludes with a brief narrative. Some scribes are lying in wait for Jesus outside of the room in which he is praying. They approach Judas and say to him, “What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.” The text concludes, “he answered them as they wished. And Judas received money and handed him over to them” (58,9-26). The subscript title occurs on the last two lines, marked off with decorations: “The Gospel of Judas” (58,28-29).

The title of the gospel raises some questions as to its authorship. Since Judas is always represented in the text in the third person, the title would indicate that he is the

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<sup>28</sup> The image of the heavenly Adam reflected in the waters of chaos is not mentioned in the text, but is present in other versions of the Sethian system.

subject of the gospel and not its putative author. The incipit refers to the “secret discourse” spoken by Jesus to Judas, but nothing is said about who wrote down the discourse. So the author remains anonymous.

There is a good deal of ambiguity in the text as to Judas’ role as a disciple of Jesus and his final destiny. Clearly, he is the private recipient of Jesus’ revelations, and is represented as possessing a knowledge of who Jesus is that is denied to “the twelve.” Behind “the twelve” we can clearly see a symbol of non-Gnostic Christianity that is contrasted with that version represented by Judas. Nevertheless, there is the puzzling reference to Judas as the “thirteenth.” A concomitant question presents itself: Is Judas represented in the gospel as a member of the “incorruptible generation of Seth”? And what is his ultimate destiny?

We recall that Jesus refers to Judas as the “thirteenth spirit” (44,21). When Judas asks Jesus about his own destiny, Jesus replies, “You will become the thirteenth” (46,19-20). In a highly damaged part of the text reference is made to Judas’ star ruling over “the [thir]teenth aeon” (55,10-11). If we now look at other Gnostic texts for references to the “thirteenth aeon” we can see that Judas’ position is not all that good. In a late text called *Pistis Sophia*, reference is made to a demonic being called “Authades . . . who is in the thirteenth aeon, who had been disobedient” (ch. 30). In the Sethian *Gospel of the Egyptians* we see the Great Seth renouncing the world and the “god of the thirteen aeons” (NHC III 63,17-18). In the Sethian tractate *Zostrianos*, Zostrianos recounts how he was “rescued from the whole world and the thirteen aeons in it and their angelic beings” (NHC VIII 4,25-28). Judas appears to be stuck in the lower cosmos, if at its highest level, the thirteenth aeon.

Then there’s the matter of Judas’ star. Stars play a rather large role in the *Gospel of Judas*, but they are usually presented in a bad light as part of the lower cosmos. For example, Jesus refers at one point to the “generations of the stars” and “the human generations” (39,13-15). In a rebuke to the twelve disciples he says, “Stop struggling with me. Each of you has his own star, [and every] one . . .” (42,6-9). The rest of the page (17 lines) is missing; so we don’t know what Jesus says about this. That every person has a star in the heavens is a commonplace in Graeco-Roman lore.<sup>29</sup>

Judas’ star is mentioned three times. After hearing Judas recount his vision of a great and beautiful temple, and his own desire to enter it, Jesus says, “Judas, your star has led you astray.” He continues, “No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy” (45,12-19). Later Jesus refers to Judas’ star ruling over “the [thir]teenth aeon” (55,10-11). At the end of Jesus’ final conversation with Judas, Jesus bids him look up at a luminous cloud surrounded by stars. He says to Judas, “The star that leads the way is your star” (57,19-20). As already noted, someone (Judas? Jesus?) enters the cloud and a voice is

<sup>29</sup> Meyer refers appositely to Plato’s *Timaeus* 41d-42b (Kasser et al., *Gospel of Judas*, p. 29, n. 59).

heard. There is considerable loss of text at this point, but if it was Judas who entered the cloud he obviously emerges again from it, for the concluding narrative portrays Judas handing Jesus over to the priests (58,9-26).

It would appear from the foregoing that Judas' destiny is to be stuck in the thirteenth aeon. But ambiguities remain. To be sure, Judas is never specifically included in the "great generation" of immortals, and at one point he seems to be excluded from it when Jesus says to him (after two missing lines) "you may grieve much when you see the kingdom and all its generation" (46,11-14). And a few lines later (in a textually corrupt passage) we find a reference to Judas' *not* ascending on high to the holy generation (46,25-47,1). And what was said to Judas by the heavenly voice in the luminous cloud? Owing to the loss of text here, we can't answer that question.

So no conclusive statement can be made as to how Judas' destiny was conceived by the author of the *Gospel of Judas*. And nothing is said in it about what happened after Judas handed Jesus over to the priests. So, if Judas can be regarded as the "hero" of the *Gospel of Judas*, the question remains: What kind of hero is he?

#### 4. The significance of the *Gospel of Judas*

To the question posed earlier regarding the *Gospel of Judas* ("Have we now found the real truth about Judas?") the answer is clearly: No. The *Gospel of Judas* is a highly imaginative reinterpretation of Christian traditions relating to Judas, written to counter positions taken by the growing orthodox church, symbolized in this gospel by the Twelve. It is a Gnostic gospel, and contains the full-blown Sethian Gnostic myth that is also found in the most important of the Sethian texts, *The Apocryphon of John*, now extant in four Coptic versions. When Jesus tells Judas that he will "sacrifice the man who bears [him]," Jesus means that his death will result in his escape from the body in which his immortal soul is imprisoned. Jesus' own escape from the body is paradigmatic of that which awaits the (Gnostic) people of "the immortal generation."

Although the *Gospel of Judas* contains no historical information about Judas Iscariot, it is an important text for two reasons. First, it shows how imaginative second-century Christians could re-construe in a new light the traditional story of Judas, the infamous "betrayers" of Jesus. Second, it provides new information on the nature of the Christian Gnostic group in which it circulated.

As to the first point, there is clear indication in the text that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* based his knowledge of the Judas tradition on the gospels that would become canonical in the orthodox church. His knowledge of the Books of Acts as well is indicated by his knowledge of Judas' replacement in the group of the Twelve, narrated in Acts 1. There is no indication at all that he had any information about Judas beyond what he read in the gospels and Acts.

Elaborating on the second point, the *Gospel of Judas* is said by Irenaeus to have been in use by “others” who “say that Cain was from the superior power,” and who venerate other biblical villains such as Esau, Korah, and the Sodomites. They are reported to claim that Judas alone knew the truth, and “accomplished the mystery of the betrayal,” producing “a fabrication which they call the Gospel of Judas.” This and additional details provided by Irenaeus led other church writers (Pseudo-Tertullian, Epiphanius, and others) to invent a special group of Gnostics called “Cainites.” And modern handbooks on Gnosticism have tended to accept their invention without question. Included in the usual information on the “Cainites” is that they had a gospel called the *Gospel of Judas*. Now that the *Gospel of Judas* is available that canard can finally be laid to rest.<sup>30</sup>

The structure of Irenaeus’ arguments in *Against Heresies* 1.29-31 should already have led people (such as myself)<sup>31</sup> to question such an assumption. Having discussed Simonians, Valentinians, and others in the previous chapters, Irenaeus says that “there has arisen a multitude of Gnostics, appearing like mushrooms out of the ground.” He then begins his discussion of their doctrines: “Some of them (*quidam enim eorum ...*,” 1.29.1).<sup>32</sup> What follows in chapter 29 is an account of part of a Gnostic myth that is now also found in the *Apocryphon of John*. The *Apocryphon of John* is now included by scholars in that variety of Gnosticism called “Sethian” or “Classic” Gnosticism, and a number of other Nag Hammadi tractates reflect that same tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Irenaeus continues his account in chapter 30: “Others yet again (*alii autem rursus*)...,” i.e., other Gnostics. Chapter 30 contains material related to the *Apocryphon of John* but much else besides, including mythological details about the biblical serpent of paradise. Much of this material has parallels in the Nag Hammadi texts. From Irenaeus’ account later patristic writers (and modern scholars) invented a group of Gnostics called “Ophites” (after the Greek word for serpent, *ophis*).

Irenaeus begins chapter 31, “Others yet again (*alii autem rursus*) ...,” i.e., other Gnostics. There follows the information about those who venerate Cain, etc. What Irenaeus gives us in all three chapters is information on a variety of groups that he includes in the larger category of “Gnostics” (1.29.1). Now we know from the mythological material in the *Gospel of Judas* that the gospel circulated among that

<sup>30</sup> The National Geographic Society book in which the *Gospel of Judas* appears contains a contribution by Bart Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas” (Kasser et al., *Gospel of Judas*, 77-120). Surprisingly, Ehrman continues to accept the fiction of Gnostic “Cainites,” and even goes so far as to begin his discussion of Gnostic Cainites with the following sentence, “One of the many Gnostic groups that Irenaeus discussed was called the Cainites” (p. 89). Of course, Irenaeus never mentions any group by that name.

<sup>31</sup> See “Cain and the Cainites,” chapter 6 in my book, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990, repr. 2006), 95-107.

<sup>32</sup> The original Greek version of *Against Heresies* is mostly lost, so we have to rely on an early Latin translation.

<sup>33</sup> On Sethian Gnosticism see esp. John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, “Études” 6; Québec: Université Laval, Louvain: Peeters, 2001).

larger group of Gnostics to whom modern scholars have given the appellation, "Sethian Gnostics." We now have further proof from the *Gospel of Judas* that there never was a separate Gnostic sect called "Cainites."

Since Irenaeus wrote his five volumes *Against Heresies* around the year 180, we can assume that the *Gospel of Judas* was in circulation sometime before that. It was probably composed around the middle of the second century.

## 5. Concluding observations

In the foregoing we have discussed how the figure of Judas Iscariot developed in early Christian traditions and literature. He does not appear at all in the earliest Christian literature, the epistles of Paul. In the gospels we can find an increasing tendency to demonize Judas, especially prominent in the Gospel of John. That tendency continues in non-canonical Christian literature.

In studying critically the obviously tendentious accounts of Judas in the New Testament, it is possible to get behind these accounts and discover a dramatically different Judas. My own view is that the role Judas played in the events of Jesus' last days is closely tied to his perception of who Jesus was, namely the Messiah of Israel. I understand his suicide to be a desperate reaction to an event that he had not envisioned, Jesus' crucifixion.

As for the Coptic *Gospel of Judas*, it presents no reliable information at all about the historical figure of Judas Iscariot. Its importance lies in the new information it contains about second-century Christian Gnosticism. First, it lays to rest, once and for all, the heresiological (and modern scholarly) construct of a "Cainite" Gnostic sect. Second, it confirms the existence, first attested by Irenaeus, of a Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*. Third, it provides a very interesting picture of how a particular group of Gnostics construed the figure of Judas Iscariot and his relationship to the Twelve.

The Twelve are thoroughly demonized and symbolize the non-Gnostic Christianity that is represented by people like Irenaeus, who are thought to have a deficient teaching and practice. As for Judas Iscariot, while he is clearly regarded as superior to the Twelve, his status is ambiguous, to say the least. This ambiguity is made all the more acute owing to lacunae in the Coptic manuscript at crucial places in the text. In the final analysis, I cannot see any evidence in the text that Judas belongs to the "immortal generation" of Gnostics, the "incorruptible generation of Seth." As the "thirteenth spirit," he would appear, rather, to be confined to the highest level of the lower cosmos.

So, if Judas Iscariot can be called the "hero" of the *Gospel of Judas*, I would suggest that he is a tragic hero.



## **Appendix: Outline of the Gospel of Judas**

1. Introduction (33,1-21)
  - A. Incipit (33,1-6)
  - B. The setting: Jesus' appearance and the call of the twelve disciples (33,6-21)
2. Jesus in dialogue with his disciples at worship (33,22-35,21)
3. Jesus speaks privately to Judas (35,21-36,10)
4. Jesus in further dialogue with his disciples (36,11-44,14)
  - A. Jesus speaks of the "great and holy generation" (36,11-37,20)
  - B. The disciples' vision of the temple (37,20-39,5)
  - C. Jesus interprets their vision (39,5-43,11)
  - D. Judas' question and Jesus' answer (43,11-44,14)
5. Judas in dialogue with Jesus (44,15-47,1)
  - A. Judas' vision (44,15-46,4)
  - B. Judas' own fate (46,5-47,1)
6. Jesus' revelation discourse to Judas (47,1-53,7)
  - A. The Invisible Spirit and the heavenly world (47,1-50,11)
  - B. The lower cosmos and its denizens (50,11-52,14)
  - C. The creation of Adam and Eve (52,14-53,7)
7. Judas' questions and Jesus' answers (53,8-58,2)
  - A. Human destiny (53,8-55,20)
  - B. Sacrifices to Saklas and Judas' sacrifice of the human Jesus (55,21-56,24)
  - C. Exaltation of the "great generation" and the star of Judas (57,1-58,2ff.)
- Conclusion: Jesus handed over to the priests (58,9-26)
- Postscript title (58,28-29)

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